



***China and the Sea:  
Understanding China's  
Contemporary Sea Power via the  
Historical Memory Approach***

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In June 2015, the international community received a reminder of the controversies surrounding the Communist Party of China's (CPC) potentially expansionist great power politics when, in reference to island-building projects in the South China Sea, the Chinese foreign ministry declared: "China will complete its reclamation project soon as part of its South China Sea construction in parts of the Nansha [Spratly] islands" (BBC, 2015:1). Such activities and narratives have raised concerns among neighbouring states over China's maritime intentions.

The CPC's land reclamations can be seen as part of a wider move towards asserting power at sea. Indeed, over the last two decades the CPC has undertaken numerous naval modernisations, seeking to develop the capacity to project force over greater oceanic distances. The most recent CPC Ministry of Defence White Paper (2015) talks about overhauling conceptions of the sea as a non-important theatre and instead viewing it as crucial to the sustainable development of China.

Conventional Realist explanations for the CPC developing sea power often centre on the country's immediate security needs, such as the potential vulnerability of the sea line of communication (SLOC) through the Straits of Malacca, upon which China is dependent for maritime commerce. As such, there is a tendency to view the emergence of contemporary Chinese sea power as something new; traditionally, China has been viewed as a land power (Eldridge, 1948; Fairbank, 1969). However, a historical-cultural perspective reveals that this is not actually true. In fact, an examination of official CPC discourses reveal that current sea power aspirations are driven by two narratives – one of humiliation and one of rejuvenation – which are grounded in the experiences of history, including periods when China possessed great sea power.

This paper will look to discuss the humiliation and rejuvenation narratives and how they drive China's contemporary sea power. As will be shown, there are two historical periods of particular interest – the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) Dynasties, the former of which possessed sea power whilst the latter did not. It is the experiences of these two periods, which predominantly drive the historical narratives underlying the current CPC's sea power aspirations.

The Ming Dynasty was not the first period in Chinese history to develop sea power, but it does represent the culmination of a process that had begun in earlier eras such as the Southern Song Dynasty. Under the Ming, sea power became a means for



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China to attain prosperity, to ensure its defence and to shape the regional order in its interests. A good example of Ming sea power comes in the form of Zheng He's Foreign Expeditionary Armada.

### Ming Sea Power and the Rejuvenation Narrative

Over a thirty-year period Zheng He's fleet undertook seven expeditions, which saw the Chinese patrol the oceans of Asia and travel as far as the East coast of Africa and the Arabian Gulf (Lo, 2012). The Armada's Treasure Ships, approximately four hundred and forty feet in length and one hundred and eighty feet wide, were the most advanced and "largest wooden ships ever seen in the world" (Dreyer, 1974:8). They deployed technologies such as balanced lugsails and watertight bulkheads, supporting non-war-time employment and economic developments within the maritime sector (Dreyer, 1974).

During each of the fleet's voyages, Zheng He collected tribute from numerous foreign states. These states opted to send envoys back with the fleet in order to pay homage to the early Ming court. This peaceful form of diplomacy, trade and sharing of China's technology and knowledge is the most common historical memory of the expeditions (Lo, 2012). Indeed, the historical memories of the early Ming's use of sea power feeds into the rejuvenation narrative. The superiority of the Ming Dynasty's sea power allowed it to flourish and expand via the tribute system, open up SLOCs and increase trade. Furthermore, it was a means of cultivating relations with China's neighbours. By having neighbouring states pay tribute to the Ming court, China established itself as the regional hegemon; providing security to those states that recognised China's status. The CPC looks back on the Ming voyages as an example of Chinese statecraft at its finest, and the rejuvenation narrative essentially views this as something to be emulated (Information Office of the State Council, 2011; 2005).

Whilst the Zheng He voyages were primarily peaceful, they were known to use force when necessary. Indeed, Dreyer (1974:xii) describes the fleet as being "frightening enough that it seldom needed to fight, but being able to fight was its primary mission." One example of force is the battle at the Sumatran port of Palembang on the return journey of the first expedition, when Zheng He inflicted a crushing defeat upon the pirate Chen Zuyi (Armstrong, 2007; Taizong Shilu cited in Dreyer, 1974:55). A second example, again in Sumatra (this time when returning from the fourth expedition), saw Zheng He utilising force to defeat a rebel leader and to help put in place an allied king on behalf of the Ming Dynasty (Dreyer, 1974). Armstrong (2007) describes the use of force by the Foreign Expeditionary Armada as an example of forward presence sea power, through the use of joint operations and power projection.

Indeed, historical memory of this early Ming strategic ideology of war deterrence through war preparedness contributes to the current rejuvenation narrative and is a key element in the 2015 White Paper, though today it goes by the term "active



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defence.” What this teaches the CPC is that strong sea power prevents humiliation at the hands of external powers by enabling control over regional political affairs.

### Qing Dynasty and the Humiliation Narrative

Factoring into the humiliation narrative are the experiences of the Qing Dynasty. Here there is a strong contrast to the Ming; the Qing period saw a decline in China's sea power. The Qing governments considered the maritime domain as a nuisance, a threat to security, and preferred to focus on developing their land power so that they could inwardly expand towards Inner Asia (Chen, 2010; Huang, 2013). As a result, the Qing Dynasty's approach to the sea was defensive. The Frontier Shift order saw populations in the Southern coastal regions undertaking forced evacuations, resulting in ordinary citizens no longer having an orientation towards the sea (Shi, 2009). Nevertheless, the Qing Dynasty did maintain a Navy, which “remained powerful enough to prevent coastal piracy [...] to maintain order on the canals and rivers, and to perform other coast guard-type functions” (Cole, 2010:4). In essence, Scobell (2003:69) describes the Qing Navy as a “coastal force” intended to defend China from “Wako” (Japanese pirates).

Unsurprisingly, this navy was rather weak, with a limited number of ships and obsolete technologies; the Qing Navy lacked experienced naval strategists, resources and unity (Elleman, 2009). These weaknesses ultimately helped to enable the humiliations experienced at the hands of foreign imperial powers such as the British and the Japanese at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The Qing intensified restrictions on trade as experienced through the Frontier Shift; foreign trade could now only be conducted through the port at Canton. The Qing believed this would deter foreign navies from visiting China's shores and would allow greater control by isolating any foreign ships (Elleman, 2009). Indeed, it was this increased control on trade which began China's ‘Century of Humiliation’; in 1839, the Qing Dynasty tried to prevent the British Opium merchants operating in China, but the Qing had heavily underestimated the British interests in continuing the Opium trade (Wang, 2012). By the time the British navy arrived, the Qing government was caught unprepared and unable to defeat the European imperialists who came by sea with superior sea power. By 1842, Shanghai had been besieged by the British Navy, quickly followed by the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal (Juvelier, 2013). This defeat for the Qing Dynasty led to the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 (Elleman, 2009). These events represent the first significant experiences of trauma during the ‘Century of Humiliation’ building the humiliation narrative and demonstrating the importance of sea power for rejuvenation.

### Historical Memory Informing CPC Policy: How a Socio-Historical Approach Helps Understanding CPC's Sea Power Aspirations and (Is)Land Reclamation

The historical drivers of the humiliation narrative are thus clear; the traumas of the Qing are attributed to the weakness of Chinese sea power, the coastal focus





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of which was unable to prevent foreign interference. This serves as a primary driver for the CPC's current sea power development, which seeks to correct this weakness. However, at the same time the power and strength of the Ming Dynasty gives rise to the rejuvenation narrative. In Chinese historical memory, the early Ming period is seen as a golden era of Chinese regional influence, and the possession of sea power is strongly connected to this. Thus, when official Chinese discourse refers to rejuvenation, they are not only talking about modernising after a period of stagnation and humiliation – they are also talking about recapturing the power and prestige of an earlier era. This is confirmed by the manner in which memories of the two periods are discussed in CPC documents such as China's Peaceful Development (Information Office of the State Council, 2011) and China's Peaceful Development Road (Information Office of the State Council, 2005).

Current People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployments could also be seen to be following the example set out by the Ming Dynasty. Just as the Zheng He voyages saw Chinese ships making their way to distant lands to conduct trade and diplomacy, contemporary PLAN missions have also been about conducting diplomatic tasks. The Harmonious Missions undertaken by the hospital ship Peace Ark have seen it visit numerous states around the world (Dooley, 2012). Similarly, PLAN vessels conducting anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa have been involved in a form of diplomacy with the navies of other states, coordinating their activities and staging goodwill visits (Willett, 2012:24).

However, just as Zheng He's armada was also a means of tackling security threats to the Ming Dynasty at great distances – a means of keeping such threats at arm's length – so too is the PLAN developing greater capabilities for deterring enemies at longer distances from the Chinese homeland. The commissioning of China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, is a good example. It symbolises the CPC's military strength and its ability to project power and forces across oceanic distances. The Liaoning, however, is just one example of China's naval rejuvenation. Over the last two decades, other elements of the PLAN – such as other platforms of its surface arm – have all been improved in ways that give them the potential to operate at greater and greater distances from the Chinese mainland. Such improvements include enhanced anti-air defences, over-the-horizon targeting systems, longer-range armaments and enhanced amphibious warfare platforms (Walton and McGrath, 2014).

### Conclusion

With the historical memories of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in mind, an alternative explanation for the land reclamation activities in the South China Sea becomes apparent. The CPC are asserting and defending China's historical territorial claims in both the South China Sea and East China Sea. Indeed, the CPC is proposing jurisdictional claims on up to 90% of the South China Sea, expanding the extent of China's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and continental shelf rights, demanding an increase of fishing rights, new energy resources, rights to oil supplies and greater control of SLOCs (Thompson, 2015). However, such territorial claims, although



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problematic to “Western” International Law, are grounded in China’s history and previous regional hegemonic status. The actions of the CPC surrounding the “Great Wall of Sand” in the South China Sea is as much about rejuvenating back to the glories of the Ming as it is about nationalism and pride defending China from further humiliation(s) as suffered by the Qing (Harris, 2015 as cited in Thompson, 2015:359).

This paper has demonstrated how there is a reciprocal link between the historical memories of China’s past and contemporary CPC policies. The CPC appear to rationalise their contemporary naval policy objectives through the development of two narratives: one of rejuvenation and one of humiliation. Indeed, the naval modernisations of the PLAN described above and the (is)land reclamation activities in the South China Sea echo the narratives of rejuvenation and humiliation, formed through historical memories, of successful sea power during the Ming Dynasty and of national humiliations suffered at the hands of inadequate sea power during the Qing Dynasty.

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